

BiH DAYTON PROJECT



"And yet it moves!" by Ambassador Sattler

August 3, 2020

On his blog, Head of the EU Delegation to BiH Johann Sattler assessed BiH's progress toward EU integration and urged leaders to renew their focus on the 14 key priorities identified in the EC Opinion.

The text of Ambassador Sattler's blog post is below.

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31.07.2020.

Last week the EU leaders reached a consensus on an ambitious plan to help their economies recover from the downturn caused by Covid-19. There have been differing views about details, but no disagreement about the need for a coordinated effort to address the effects of the pandemic.

The motto of the German EU Presidency, which began on 1 July, is "Together for Europe's Recovery". The Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, will be part of this recovery through grants and loans. In the next six months, the Commission is to present an Economic and Investment Plan for the region that will involve, among other things, support for infrastructure, public services and job creation.

The inspirational American civil rights leader John Lewis, who died recently, encouraged those who want to achieve positive change in society to keep their "eyes on the prize". As we move through what may be the most challenging phase of the pandemic, it is important not to lose sight of our long-term goals. The prize for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to have the same rights, the same opportunities, the same freedoms, the same security, the same living standards as people in the rest of Europe. The way to secure that prize is to implement the measures clearly laid out on the path to EU membership.

While recognising the benefits of EU membership, BiH politicians sometimes seem to think that the steps required to join the EU should only be taken after perceivably more pressing matters have been attended to.

This often leads to critical reforms, requiring relentless and continued work being pushed to the margins of the political agenda. After months, even years, of no real and lasting progress, citizens believe that membership is no longer a real possibility, that Bosnia and Herzegovina has missed the train and that the rest of Europe is moving on without it.

Though understandable, this perception is not right. It is, in fact, eminently realistic for Bosnia and Herzegovina to aim for reaching EU candidate status. What is needed now is a focus on the EU's to-do list for BiH, the so-called 14 key priorities identified in the EC Opinion.

In the early seventeenth century, after Galileo had given in to his Renaissance masters and recanted the revolutionary (and accurate) findings of his scientific enquiries, he was reported to have remarked of the earth's orbit around the sun 'eppur si muove' – and yet it moves. Today, despite the difficulties Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone through, despite the enormous challenges thrown up by the pandemic, it can also be said that the trajectory towards the EU continues regardless. It continues notwithstanding the ambivalence of some leaders. It continues because it is right for the country and its citizens.

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In recent months, the political leadership has come together to make the arrangements that were necessary in order to receive millions of Euros of aid from the EU and other international organizations. This aid is already benefiting citizens. In the coming months, the same approach can help to maintain the forward momentum and, most importantly, ensure that citizens continue to benefit.

As an important, concrete demonstration of the BiH leadership's commitment to EU integration, the BiH Presidency has taken an active role in advancing the integration process. It has committed to work with the Council of Ministers, the parliamentary assemblies, and civil society to address some of the key issues for BiH's rapprochement with the EU in an inclusive manner.

Since then, the CoM, the parliaments and political leaders have taken concrete steps and delivered on some of the 14 key priorities, such as allowing the citizens of Mostar to vote at the local elections this year or unblocking the work of the joint Parliamentary Committee with the EP after 5 years.

This is a year that each of us will remember for a lifetime.

Many of us have experienced personal loss because of the pandemic and all of us have experienced stress and uncertainty

Yet, many have stepped forward and shown integrity, compassion and competence in order to serve the common good. *Eppur si muove* – the strengths of this country and its people can still prevail despite the difficulties. We must not lose sight of this fundamental truth.

I hope that politicians and others will see the summer break as a time to prepare for renewed and determined activity when the parliamentary assemblies reconvene. This does not have to be a wasted year. It can be a year in which the long-term goal of EU membership, and the benefits the required steps toward it bring to BiH citizens, are kept to the fore and every opportunity is seized. If our BiH partners adopt this approach, they will certainly find that we do too.

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